

WellBeing International

WBI Studies Repository

2022

Do you Suffer From Pet-Related Separation Anxiety

Hal Herzog

Follow this and additional works at: https://www.wellbeingintlstudiesrepository.org/sc_herzog_compass



Hal Herzog Ph.D.

Animals and Us

Do You Suffer From Pet-Related Separation Anxiety?

If you become upset when you are away from your pets, you are not alone.

Posted June 20, 2022

KEY POINTS

- Separation anxiety has been extensively studied in pets, but few studies have examined separation anxiety in their owners.
- Nearly half of pet owners report that they can become anxious when they are away from their companion animals.
- Two studies shed light on this important but neglected aspect of the human-animal bond.

My partner died unexpectedly in 2020. He had a heart attack and died in my arms. Our four dogs were all I had to keep me going. Over the next six months, I could only be away from our dogs for a couple of hours before I was a crying, bitchy, anxious, freaked-out mess. —Brenda, dog lover

In 2015, the American Psychiatric Association officially recognized separation anxiety disorder as a diagnostic category of mental illness. It applies to both children and adults who have an “unusually strong fear or anxiety to separating from people they feel a strong attachment to.” But can individuals like Brenda, who are extremely devoted to their companion animals, experience separation anxiety when they are away from their pets?

I recently posted a message on Facebook saying I was interested in hearing from people who had suffered from anxiety when they were away from their pets. I quickly got several dozen responses. Susie, for example, described her fears when she leaves her cats at home by themselves. She wrote, “I think of all the horrible things that could go wrong—fire, carbon monoxide, etc.—and them dying scared and alone.” Joan said her anxiety got worse during the pandemic—now she takes her two dogs with her nearly everywhere. Susan wrote, “I love my dog soooo much. I constantly feel like I’m on borrowed time with her, and it makes me anxious to leave her home when I’m at work. I rearrange my life to try to be around her.”

In a [2022 YouGov survey](#), 40% of a representative sample of American pet owners answered yes to the question, “Do you feel anxious leaving your pets at home alone all day?” Hundreds of research papers have been published on separation anxiety in pets (mostly on dogs). Yet only a few studies have investigated separation anxiety in pet owners.

Pet-Related Separation Anxiety In People?

In a [study published in the Journal of Affective Disorders](#), Australian researchers explored the psychological underpinnings of pet-owner separation anxiety. The lead researcher was Elisha Dowsett of the University of Adelaide, and the subjects were 313 Australian pet owners, 90% of whom were women.

The participants completed four standardized psychological scales. Owners with multiple pets were instructed to think of the pet they felt closest to when responding to the items. The research materials included:

- A measure of human-directed separation anxiety (the Severity Measure for Separation Anxiety Disorder-Adult).

- A measure of pet-directed separation anxiety. (For this, the investigators used the human-directed anxiety scale with the wording adapted to separation from pets.)
- A scale that assesses the degree to which people are attached to their pets (the Lexington Attachment to Pets Scale).
- A scale that measures perceived social support (the Social Provisions Scale).

The Research Questions and Their Answers

Here are some of the questions the researchers addressed, along with the answers.

Question 1: Are people who are more prone to human-directed separation anxiety more likely to experience pet-separation anxiety?

Answer: Yes. As the researchers predicted, there was a strong relationship between scores on the human separation anxiety scale and the pet-directed separation anxiety scale.

Question 2: Are pet owners who are especially attached to their pets more likely to experience pet separation anxiety?

Answer: Yes. There was a strong positive relationship between the pet attachment and the pet-separation anxiety scale scores.

Question 3: Are people who have less social support among friends and relatives more likely to experience pet-separation anxiety?

Answer: Yes.

Question 4: Do dog and cat owners differ in the degree to which they experience pet-separation anxiety?

Answer: Yes. As the researchers predicted, dog owners were more prone to pet separation anxiety than cat owners.

Question 5: Are pet owners who do not have children at home more prone to pet-related separation anxiety?

Answer: Yes.

To summarize, people who experienced pet-related separation anxiety tended to be highly attached dog owners who did not have children living at home and who had limited friendships. In addition to being anxious about their animal companions, they were also prone to worry about losing the important human attachment figures in their lives. Keep in mind that these were general trends and did not apply to all of the subjects who suffered from pet-related separation anxiety.

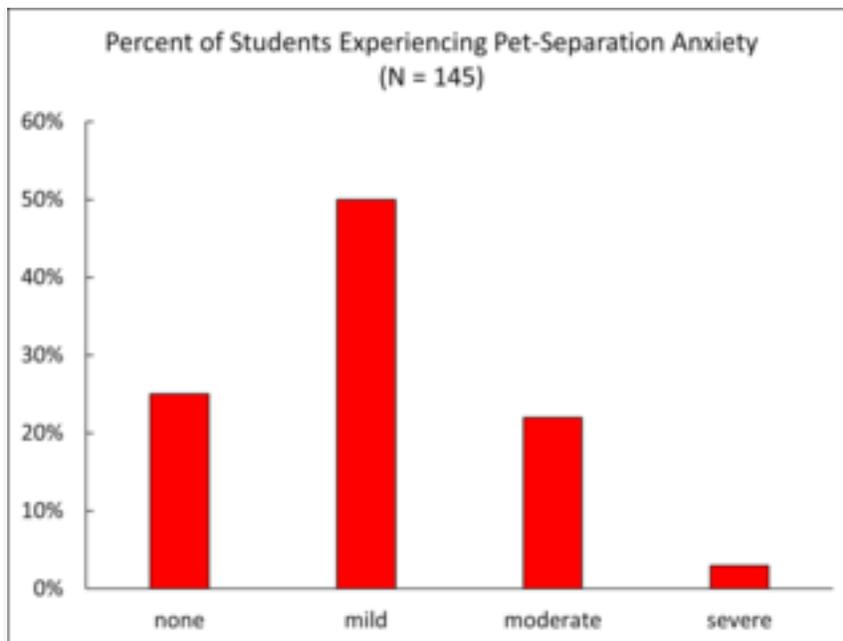
Pet Separation Anxiety in Stressed-Out College Students

The second study was conducted by the anthrozoologists Alexa Carr and Patricia Pendry of Washington State University and was [published in the journal *Anthrozoos*](#). They were interested in pet-separation anxiety in a group of stressed owners—college students at the beginning of their freshman year. After all, many new college students are undergoing a period of great change in their lives, including separation from their family pets.

The research was conducted in two phases. During the summer before they began college, incoming freshmen were sent an email inviting them to take part in the study. Students with pets who agreed to participate completed an online questionnaire. The items focused on attachments and interactions with their family pets but some of the items were related to their levels of stress, including having a history of mental health issues.

The second research phase was conducted two weeks after the subjects arrived on campus. This time, the students were asked to complete a questionnaire on pet-related separation anxiety. Like the Australian researchers, Carr and Pendry used a modified version of the Severity Measure for Separation Anxiety Disorder adapted to measure pet-separation anxiety. The subjects were asked, for example, to rate the frequency that, over the previous week, they had experienced “feeling anxious, worried, or nervous about being separated from my pet.”

The results were surprising. Three-fourths of the 145 participants had experienced at least mild pet-



Source: Graph by Hal Herzog

separation anxiety. Twenty-two percent of the students indicated that their anxiety was moderate, and in 3%, it was severe. As with the Australian study, individuals who were most highly attached to their pets were also more likely to experience pet-related separation anxiety.

In addition, the students who were highly involved in their pets' lives—the ones who frequently petted and talked to their pets and let their pets sleep in their beds—tended to have high pet-separation anxiety scores. Finally, pet-related separation anxiety was more prevalent in students who had a history of anxiety, PTSD, and self-harm. (Unlike the Australian study, there were no differences in the pet-related separation anxiety scores of dog- and cat-loving students.)

The Bottom Line

These studies suggest that pet separation anxiety is an important aspect of the human-animal bond that has been neglected by researchers. And I suspect it is surprisingly common. Indeed, this morning, when I told my neighbor Lucy what I was writing about, she said, “Oh, you need to talk to my husband. We were supposed to go to Europe for a month this summer, but James wanted to come back two weeks early. He was worried about our dog.”

In an email, Dr. Anna Chur-Hansen, a member of the Australian research team, told me that in her experience, pet separation anxiety is often “sub-clinical.” That is, it can cause some psychological discomfort, but not interfere with daily life. On the other hand, sometimes, the anxiety can be debilitating. She wrote, *In my interviews on the human-animal bond I heard stories of people who have never met their grandchildren because they won't leave the cat to travel for a few days, and elderly people with serious health problems that need hospital care, but they won't leave their animal, even for an overnight stay.*

References

- Carr, A. M., & Pendry, P. (2022). Understanding Links Between College Students' Childhood Pet Ownership, Attachment, and Separation Anxiety During the Transition to College. *Anthrozoös*, 35(1), 125-142.
- Dowsett, E., Delfabbro, P., & Chur-Hansen, A. (2020). Adult separation anxiety disorder: The human-animal bond. *Journal of Affective Disorders*, 270, 90-96.
-